

INDIA ART FAIR: FOCUSING ON SIX CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARTISTS



'Postcards from Home', Manisha Gera Baswani.

In its eleventh edition, the four-day India Art Fair that concluded on the 3rd of this month, showcased sixty galleries, including a number of new and international galleries- along with institutions, platforms and projects. In accompaniment to galleries displaying collections of paintings, sculptures, photography, installations and archival material, were booths exhibiting tribal art forms, the crafts of India- while various institutional platforms and foundations supported interactive projects and young artist displays. Art Projects, a separate space, engaged the audience in experimental art, videos, sound installations and collaborative projects. Certain galleries also dedicated sections to focus on the solo works of established and emerging artists, bringing into discussion the exclusive bodies of collections, as well as the current and emerging trends in the production of the arts.

Focusing on the contemporary art section, I choose to discuss the projects of six contemporary artists working across various conceptions, materials, mediums and from diverse personal experiences, yet gravitating towards addressing similar social concerns.



(<http://artdose.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/DSCF0413.jpg>).

'Palindrome Anagram' (2018), Jitish Kallat. Mixed media on linen

Entering the massive fairgrounds called to attention sacks of wheat placed in two long rows, with stacks of postcards positioned around its mouth- made available for the audience to interact with and take home. Manisha Gera Baswani's project 'Postcards from Home' supported by Gallery Espace, delineates stories from the India-Pakistan Partition, using the significance of and the intimacy shared with the medium of the postcard. Each postcard carries a single image of the forty-seven artists from across borders photographed by her, accompanied by their short personal or handed-down accounts in the form of memories, testimonies and narratives that retain shared historical instances and affinities between the two countries- printed on the back. 'Postcards from Home' is a section of her larger ongoing project, started sixteen years ago when she first began using the camera. Titled 'Artist Through the Lens', Baswani has engaged in documenting the lives of visual artists both in India and Pakistan, in the process creating a visual archive. The interaction with this project, incites the viewer to reimagine fond memories of a long past childhood, of oneself and of the other.

Nature Morte focused on Jitish Kallat's solo titled 'Palindrome Anagram' with which Kallat returned to the medium of painting after a gap of five years. This recent body of large works are mixed-media paintings on linen, followed by a smaller series called 'Untitled (Emergence)' worked with water and oil-based pigments on gesso panels. The paintings on linen indicate abstract juxtapositions of blotches of paint and diagrams- both organic and geometric in structure- of fauna, biological remnants, scientific and historical figures, along with handwritten text placed against graph sheets. The working process through the smaller series is suggestive of a natural course to their becoming- emerging out of a central circular capacity, reminiscent of toxic matter as if observed through a lens-based device.

Nature Morte also displayed a relatively smaller work of artist-architect Martand Khosla, 'Upwards' (2018). The work utilizes recycled wood and steel to portray a rotting sense of urbanisation. The feeble structure, identical to termite mounds, grows lengthwise, with each new level supported by seemingly rusting horizontal steel ledges. Its mere installation on the wall, conveys the harsh absurdities of unpredictably fast-growing and transforming Indian cityscapes, and perilous situations as a consequence of this. Employing the term "MesoDomain" he identifies and refers to a "space in between known areas, without boundaries, self-regulated and intangible", that invades the functioning of the body and the psyche situated within these landscapes. Alternate and multiple realities are inescapable.



(http://artdose.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Shalina-S-Vichitra-In-Search-of-Home-stoneware.-Photo_Art.Motif_-e1550212986149.jpg)

'In Search of Home', Shalina S Vichitra. Stoneware mural. Photo: Art.Motif

Shalina S Vichitra represented by Gallery Art Motif showed two of her works, 'In Search of Home', a stoneware series of small house-like structures installed on the wall, and 'A Thousand White Flags' which was on display in the Art Projects tent. The former work speaks of the widespread refugee crisis as a result of unending conflicts, where not only the physical body, but also the mental state of the individual is persistently fighting displacement. In the process of searching for a new home, one leaves behind material belongings, intangible memories and lived experiences in an unattainable past. Having made frequent trips to the Himalayas and interacting with the Tibetan refugees within their camps has exposed her to the many degrees and aspects of loss and disruptions. She visually reconstructs a collection of homes from the extensive fragments of thoughts and memories- yet realizes the futility of the mere act. Shalina extends this process into her latter installation using the symbolic meaning of flags. Like Buddhist flags that culturally symbolize the safeguarding of an area, her project extends across the exhibition space, recontextualising its meaning. Shalina began placing white flags -a marker of peace- at high altitudes and trekking sites, as a gesture in the "planting of emotional, cultural and geographical footnotes." This "process of archaeology mapping and inquiry" is an ongoing project since the year 2000.



(<http://artdose.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/DSCF0452.jpg>)

'Refugee' (2019), Sudipta Das. Mixed media on Hanji paper

One cannot miss the number of small figures climbing the height of the wall, seemingly bewildered- perhaps escaping the quandaries of today's socio-political conditions. In a confused and hurried state of affairs, these painted paper figures holding taut their possessions and close-ones are on the move. The installation at Gallery Latitude 28's booth by Sudipta Das entitled 'Refugee' (2019), explores the perpetual traumas and struggles of the displaced, always in the hope of finding settlement for a better future. Each figure conveys a sense of the strive for survival, climbing away to encounter an unknown destination. Having participated in the agonies of her own family's experiences, cross-border migration becomes the key focus in her work. Interestingly, the installation is designed to make the viewer feel an unattainable vertical distance- one doesn't know and cannot see what lies beyond. Perhaps it is an amicable situation, a better location? Perhaps not. What overcomes the viewers is a sense of curious anxiety.

Metta Contemporary, one of the younger galleries established in 2016 and based out of Navi Mumbai, showcased an array of interesting artists and their politically conscious works. Among them, Amol K. Patil's display generated an inquisitive engagement. 'What is Human Becomes Animal (Kinetic Sculpture)'- is a wooden box containing iron filings within a magnetic framework, engineered to move in a circular motion. This is flanked by smaller entities called 'Dust Objects', as well as drawings of feet presented above. With this series, the artist, on the one hand, reiterates how historical objects of value are found dust-covered in museums, while on the other, how physically manipulated and artificially aged artefacts in the form of fake antiques circulate in the markets, deluding a sense of history. He simultaneously speaks for the grime-layered exerting bodies of the sanitation workers from the Dalit community that he himself hails from, employed by the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai to clean polluted localities, but not provided with enough health benefits in return. His relationship to his family and the sweepers of the city was explored with his performance 'Sweep-Walkers',

where he invited sweepers to the fairgrounds to perform their daily activity of sweeping, prompting the viewer to observe the performative element in this act- something one would otherwise dismiss in a public space. With this, he expresses a desire to make art an accessible domain.



'Dust Objects', Amol K. Patil. Photo: Metta Contemporary

The private, the personal and the physical, situated within the synthetic ecosystem, is displaced, discarded or migratory in nature, highlighting the material and temporal quality of aspirations. These everyday negotiations and a strive for the better are provisionally redeemed by the scientific and the religious within a political system- where everything is subsequently reduced to a performative spectacle. A focus on these six artists (amongst others) at the India Art Fair, can lead one to discover indistinguishable underlying personal intents in the production of a work of art that observes, reflects and makes subtle remarks, thus encouraging one to ponder over the layered narratives of artistic expression within disruptive social structures of the day.

Cover image: 'Postcards from Home', Manisha Gera Baswani.

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